Dismissal of gay troops plummets, group says

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WASHINGTON • The number of gays dismissed from the military under the Pentagon's "don't ask, don't tell" policy has dropped to its lowest level in nine years as U.S. forces fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, a report by an advocacy group says.

The military discharged 787 gays and lesbians last year, says the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, which attributed the decline to the importance of U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The figure marks a 17 percent decrease from 2002 and a 39 percent drop from 2001, just before the conflicts began in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"You have to ask yourself, and you have to ask the Pentagon, why are the discharges going down?" said C. Dixon Osburn, executive director of the advocacy group and one of the report's authors. "When they need people, they keep them. When they don't, they implement their policy of discrimination with greater force."

The Pentagon did not respond to calls seeking comment.

The military's policy on gays, known as "don't ask, don't tell," has been in place since 1994. It allows gays to serve in uniform as long as they don't reveal their sexual orientation.

The military has discharged nearly 10,000 people for violations of the policy since it took effect, the report says.

The number of gays discharged increased from 1994 to 1998. Dismissals decreased slightly in 1999 but then increased again until peaking at 1,273 discharges in 2001.

The Army, the largest of the services, is so stretched by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and missions elsewhere it's using its "stop-loss" authority to prevent soldiers from retiring or otherwise leaving when their service obligation ends.

The Air Force, on the other hand, is trying to reduce its ranks through attrition, and the Navy is shedding personnel.

All the services except for the Air Force dismissed fewer gays last year than the year before. The Air Force dismissed 142 people for violating "don't ask, don't tell," up from 121 in 2002.

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ed to be the star witness, telling grand jurors why he and his family initially denied any wrongdoing by Jackson.

The defense is expected to say the child and his family belatedly made allegations of molestation because they were rebuffed in an effort to get money from Jackson.

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